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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that most elders live their lives in the community, much of what is known about identity in old age is derived from studies of unique groups of elders. Turner proposed that identity is anchored in social order through the individual's adherence to either an institutional or an impulsive basis for action, and through the immediate location of identity in either the person or his/her role. To test this concept, open-ended interviews were conducted with 50 older people in a small community. When asked what it is like to be a specific chronological age, 21 respondents indicated that they did not see their age as distinguishable from other ages. However, for 26 respondents age was viewed as having particular meaning; 18 expressed ambivalent meaning, 5 expressed positive meaning, and 3 expressed negative meaning. Most elders seemed to be saying, "As far as age goes, I am what I am." The results offer evidence that age and old age are not necessarily mainstays of identity to elders who live in the community, although most recognize and enact roles associated with old age, e.g., as retirees or grandparents. A shift in chronological age and a definition of old as deleterious do not appreciably alter the sense of identity. (Author/JAC)

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I Am What I Am:
Age and Identity in the Community

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Paper presented to the 1982 annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, November 22, Boston, Massachusetts.

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the majority of elders live out their lives in the community, much of what is known about identity in old age is derived from studies of unique groups of elders. It is fair to say that resultant generalizations about age and identity have limited relevance to the majority of the old. In addition, theorists often assume that old age has uniform meaning to the old. Yet one may just as readily argue that old age is a problematic encounter between individual and social order where meaning influences the shape of identity (I am). To trace the melding of definition and identity two concepts suggested by Ralph Turner are useful. Turner proposes that identity is anchored in social order through 1) the individual's adherence to either an institutional or impulsive basis for action, and 2) the immediate location of identity in either the person and role. Hence, elders perceive, experience and make sense of self differently because meanings and identity anchorages vary. This synthesis is supported by findings from a stratified random sample of one community's elders. A variegated pattern of old age in identity is discerned.

Acknowledgments

I owe a heartfelt thank you to the community elders who participated in this research. The willingness to talk about the meaning of old age and to recount both the pleasant and unpleasant course of a life has enabled me to add another dimension to a general theory of identity. It has also permitted the analysis of old age and identity to capture and to represent some part of what it is like to enact that identity in the context of a community.

My thanks also go to Al Chevan and Jack Hewitt who have been conscientious and perspicacious critics. Their remarks have contributed much to the development of this work, although that development has not always been in the manner or direction they or I initially anticipated.

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Introduction: The Problem of Age and Identity

There are three distinct but related problems with contemporary analyses of age and identity. The most significant issue, which is an underlying rather than explicit theme that prevades the theoretical and empirical approach to age and identity, is indelibly and largely shaped by a host of external social forces. A contemporary social scientist responding to Lear's plaintive question, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?", (King Lear I. iv. 229) is more than likely to answer: society and its institutions have told you Lear by stripping you of accumulated roles and statuses. Moreover, the social scientist might predict that Lear and other elders are likely to receive an unsatisfying response to this query about identity because old age itself is often characterized like the moor--a desolate and treacherous terrain. Given such an inhospitable environment and the attribution of negative meaning to the idea of being old, is there any possibility for something other than an unhappy search for the answer to Lear's question? This second problem is skirted in many discussions of age and identity. Social scientists presume to know quite a bit about how elders define old age. However, social scientists err in the same direction as the playwright, both impute unremittingly harsh features to this portion of existence. Of course, Shakespeare had a stake in assigning wholly negative features to old age; his tragedy had to have a logical progression. Yet the business of social

science does not involve the creation of a fictitious script. The task of social science is to uncover the actual range of meaning and then to delineate the consequences such meanings have for individuals and for society.

A third problem with the investigation of age and identity resides in the samples of the old which are used as the empirical basis for demonstrating relationships between age and identity. Some wonderful studies that depict the social worlds of the old only permit social scientists to make limited generalizations about identity in old age precisely because the elders studied are unique or special in many respects. Studies of elders in retirement communities, ethnic enclaves, or institutions add important information to the annals of aging, but they do not provide much insight into the general description of how old age is incorporated into identity among the majority of the old who reside in communities.

This research on age and identity attempts to address these three contentions. To get round the assumption that identity is an addend or a summation of external inputs, this research begins from an entirely different point. It argues, as symbolic interactionists do, that an individual's sense of identity is based on an interpretative process that is initiated by defining and acting toward objects. Thus, it does not presume that there is a uniformly negative meaning assigned to old age which is accepted, absorbed and incorporated into identity by those sixty years old and older. Instead, this project explores the

meaning age has for a sample of community elders, and then asks elders to describe the ways in which age is melded into individual identities. In so doing, this work breaks away from extant models of age and identity, models which embody deterministic and oversocialized (Wrong, 1961) conceptions of human interaction.

This does not mean that the work challenges the prevailing view that there are specific problems that pertain to the old in aggregate; namely, the devaluation of the old vis a' vis other age categories. Nonetheless, even admitting the presence of such a structural and comparative disadvantage, does not automatically mean that this is perforce how elders view or live out old age. This study examines how the social fact of being old is interpreted, enacted, and fused into variegated patterns of identity. It is about time to listen to the voices of elders as they unfold details that begin to shape an answer to Lear's question.

An Interactionist Theory of Identity: The Starting Place

Meaning

A primary tenet of symbolic interaction is that people act toward objects on the basis of their definition of objects. People discern and define objects or situations when there is some problematic encounter or interaction. Dewey saw such confrontations as the spark that ignited a cognitive process which culminated in making sense of the problematic object.

He termed this process rationality (Dewey, 1910). Mead viewed such confrontations as stimulants to the creation and re-creation of self. Age, old age in particular, may be treated as one such problematic encounter between the individual and the social order. Thus, it becomes important to understand how people define and act toward this problematic encounter with a universal bumper. As Mead (1964:165) has stated, meaning is the essence of interaction.

> Language does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created . . . Meaning is thus not to be conceived fundamentally, as a state of consciousness or as a set of organized relations existing or subsisting mentally outside the field of experience into which they enter; on the contrary, it should be conceived objectively, as having its existence within this field itself.

Indeed, one of the interesting ironies of social gerontology is that despite increasing refinements of age terminology (chronological, functional, physiological, social) most research sees the investigation of what old age means as peripheral at best. The approach to the study of what age means has taken three shapes: 1) disparate works which demonstrate a normative template (Neugarten, 1968; Neugarten et. al., 1968; Sontag, 1972; Lowenthal et. al., 1976; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977);[1] 2) a plethora of works, Ward (1977) is one recent example, which ask objectively young, middle-aged, and

old people to check age preferences as young, middle-aged, or old; 3) some qualitative studies that tangentially examine meaning (Myerhoff, 1978; Blythe, 1977; Matthews, 1979). With the exception of the last group, the meaning of old age has been established by devising taxonomic categories rather than by disclosing the processes that shape an elder's definition/meaning of old.

The significance of meaning obtains clearer exposition in Blumer's (1969:3-5) incisive discussion of premises of symbolic interaction. Self-indication or the interpretative process is a key part of building identity (I am . . .).

> First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting . . . The making of such indications is an internalized social process in that the actor is interacting with himself. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings . . . interpretation . . . [is] a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action.

For it is in identity (self as object/subject) that meaning manifests itself through actions towards others.

Identity

As defined from with a symbolic interactionist perspective, identity is the placement of an individual within a social world. Identity is found at the intersection of the social

allocation of meaning (others) and the individual's interpretation of meaning (self-indication). As such, identity is an observable, public spot which is in turn composed of biographic and situated elements. To fill in the contents of the construct of identity there are two avenues of pursuit. One may ask how people interpret the course of their lives (biographic), or one may delineate the roles people enact in a variety of contexts (situated). Moreover, recent work by Ralph Turner (1976, 1978) suggests another way to describe how old age is variously incorporated into identity.

Turner views identity as an anchorage in the social order. This identity anchorage is the result of two processes that emanate from the individual's expression of self. For Turner identity is anchored by: 1) the individual's adherence to either an insitutional or impulsive imperative which has a direct influence on how people place themselves in the social order; and, 2) the immediate location of identity in either the person or the role, and sometimes in a merger of person and role.

With respect to the former concept, Turner argues that those who apprehend the true self as revealed within an overarching normative framework are those who anchor themselves to an institutional expression of identity. Contrast this to the impulsive who has a peripheral attachment to that same framework and finds her/his identity anchored in sensibility not in convention. Such an impulsive "puts in time" fulfilling

formal expectations but sees his/her identity as residing down other non-institutional avenues. Turner's distinction rests upon the idea that individual identities are changeable and creative building blocks of social order, not merely collections of traits whose endless permutations are subsumed by social order. Institutional and impulsive identities have different connections to the social order and expressions in that order. Hence, they see, experience, and make sense of self and others in different ways. As Turner states a concrete example of this may be seen among the old. The old with institutional anchorages are more likely than those with impulsive anchorages to face difficulties in retiring. This is so because retirement truncates future obligations and expectations at the same time that it disposes of previously important ones. The institutional is set adrift from his anchorage and is bereft of self.

In regard to the latter concept, person-roler merger, Turner posits three criteria indicative of merger: 1) playing a role in a context where the role is inappropriate; 2) resistance to dropping a role; and, 3) articulating the values and beliefs associated with a role. Turner implies that when personal identity embodies a merger between person and role in lieu of a compartmentalization of person and role, the melding may not be wholly positive in its consequences.[2] The inability to separate person and role may actually impede socialization into new roles or prevent the development of self through the person rather than the role. In addition, Turner notes that the

convergence between person and role may be imperfect. He cites as an example of this the "widespread resistance among the elderly to accepting an age role as a personal anchorage." (Turner, 1978:17)

When Turner's cornerstones of identity are used as separate dimensions of an identity anchorage, they provide the analytic components which enable one to delineate how old age is expressed as part of individual identity and social order (see Table One). The columns of this table trichotomize personal anchorage of identity, while the rows divide societal anchorage of identity into institution and impulse. The resulting cells do not prescribe specific identities, they simply outline possible configurations of identity given the convergence of divergence of person-role and the corresponding institutional or impulsive linkage.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

In cell II, for example, one would expect that elders with a personal anchorage based on fulfilling role expectations and a societal anchorage in performing those roles (institution) tender many definitions of self as old and take more than a modicum of pleasure in playing out any combination of old age roles. There is no trouble in absorbing old age as part of an identity anchorage. Likewise there is no difficulty for those typified by cell IV, although these seniors have markedly

Table One

Identity Anchorage with Respect of Old Age

Societal Anchorage	Personal Anchorage: Person	Personal Anchorage: Role	Personal Anchorage: Convergence Person-Role
Institution	may resist seeing self as old. sees self as emerging in non-institutional settings, but because societal anchorage is institutional will enact old age roles. (I)	accepts definitions of self as old; takes pleasure in enacting any number of old age roles retiree, grandparent, senior citizen, leisure, sick role. (II)	likely to resist defining self as old, "I'm not old, but my neighbor ___ is." Becuase the societal anchorage is institutional, old age roles are met but without a sense that identity is found there. It is expressed in more important non-age roles that are generally thought to be inappropriate for the old. (III)
Impulse	definition of self as old may be idiosyncratic. such redefinition without accompanying roles means "Now that I'm old I can really pursue what I want to do." (IV)	will put time into old age roles but sees self as existing outside roles. true self not at play simply because one enacts old age roles. (V)	redefinition or rejection of self as old and resistance or rejection of old age roles. "I'm the same as always, I see myself as doing just what I please. After all, I've always done so. or Now that I'm old I may do so." (VI)

different identity anchorages from those in cell II. Cell IV consists of impulsives who find the true expression of personal identity in person not in role. This applies to many aspects of self and pertains to old age. These elders are likely to redefine old age in their own terms, and until old age is redefined it may not be a crucial part of identity anchorage simply because these individuals resist standard non-age and old age roles as identity anchorages.

The strain in incorporating old age into an identity anchorage is seen in the remaining cells. The discordant, cells I and V, are pulled apart by conflicting personal and societal anchorages. In cell I the institutional may accept the entailment of fulfilling roles without acceding the primacy of an old age role, while those in cell V may perform roles but simultaneously understand their personal identity anchorage to be outside old age or non-age roles, and appear to others as those who march to the beat of Thoreau's different drummer. The cases of merger in either sort of societal anchorage give vent to some of the most dramatic expressions of old age in identity--in cell III the widespread resistance Turner referred to; and, in cell VI, the infrequent instance of rejection of old age as influencing any part of identity anchorage.

Summary of Theoretical Points

It has been argued that an analysis of old age and identity should begin with an examination of what age means to those who

embody it. This is best done by studying elders whose lives are not exceptionally exceptional (e.g. a sample of a community's population of elders), and by giving them the opportunity to define age in their own terms. It is further argued that concepts discussed in Ralph Turner's work have direct relevance to tracing how and where these definitions become part of an identity anchorage. Turner's work provides a symbolic interactionist framework for describing the range of old age identities, or more accurately, identities based on old age.

A Brief Comment on Methodology and Method

The stratified random sample of fifty respondents was drawn from a known universe of 1,754 residents sixty years old and older who were part of a small community in western Massachusetts. A stratified random sample was drawn to maximize the likelihood that all elders would have the chance to be selected for this community study of identity. The universe of 1,754 elders failed to include those elders who were not listed in the community's annual street directory, and it missed those who were not listed on the local senior center's mailing list.[3] Thus, some elders were not included in the roster compiled for the sample selection. The distributions of the known population and of the sample are given below.

TABLES TWO AND THREE ABOUT HERE

TABLE TWO

Distribution of Known Population by Age and Sex in Percentage

		Sex		
		Female	Male	Total
AGE	60-64	13 (231)	13 (219)	26 (450)
	65-74	24 (431)	18 (312)	42 (743)
	75-84	16 (280)	7 (133)	23 (413)
	85 +	6 (97)	3 (51)	9 (148)
	TOTAL	59 (1039)	41 (715)	100 (1,754)

TABLE THREE

Distribution of Sample by Age and Sex in Percentage

		Sex		
		Female	Male	Total
AGE	60-64	8 (4)	10 (5)	18 (9)
	65-74	28 (14)	16 (8)	44 (22)
	75-84	16 (8)	8 (4)	24 (12)
	85 +	10 (5)	4 (2)	14 (7)
	TOTAL	62 (31)	38 (19)	100 (50)

The interview schedule followed a semi-structured format that was organized to elicit biographical or retrospective information as well as commentary about the present and the future. The questions were open-ended ones that allowed respondents to answer in their own words, to adjust their responses in any number of ways, and to shape some part of the inquiry. With one exception, respondents did not try to direct the substance of the interview far afield, nor did they attempt to evade questions about age by jumping biographical time zones. In fact, an intriguing and unexpected response was that some were quite astounded that there were questions asked about present lives and future lives. Many assumed that the interview would only ask for thier impressions of the past.

The majority of interviews which were collected during the winter and spring of 1982 and took seventy-five to ninety minutes to complete. However, there was one as short as forty-five minutes and several as long as one hundred and fifty minutes. The questions pertinent to this analysis are three: What is it like to be _____?; What is old?; and, Do you think of yourself as old? In order to highlight the quality of individual responses as well as the pattern of general responses each question will be discussed with regard to specific examples and inductively derived categories of response.

(person's age)

Findings

What people said about being 60 or 73 or 85 or 92

In responding to the question, what's it like to be a specific chornological age?, elders reveal quite a bit about their definitions of the situation of being a particular age. They also impart their sense of being attached, or seeing as problematic, various aspects of being a particular age. One eighty-year old widow who had only lived in the community for three years captured the indistinct character of being a given age.

> "Well, I've grown old gradually so when I realized that I was, it was my eightieth birthday, you know, I could hardly believe it. . . Here I am eighty years old, it's a turning point in almost everybody's life, but I didn't feel any different excepting I felt kind of lonely all of a sudden . . . Oh, I wouldn't know how eighty, how you're supposed to feel at eighty, see? I can remember asking my uncle that when he was 80. . . He said, 'I don't feel any different than I ever did.'"

This respondent had a situational twinge of loneliness on her birthday, but all in all eighty is not perceived to be substantially different from other ages. In fact, this respondent offers as an implicit part of her answer a quasi-theory[4] to explain the lack of distinctive qualities: she has grown "old" gradually, and she doesn't know what it should be like, and as further support, her uncle didn't notice or feel any different at eight either. Note well that the respondent calls herself old even though she defines the specific age itself as

indistinguishable from other ages. Clearly she is not denying age generally, but she is disclosing a definition of a specific age that says eighty is another notch; it does not have a specific set of contents or meanings for her. In this sample, there were twenty other respondents of all ages who defined their respective ages as notches that do not have any identifiable or calcuable impact on what it is like to be that age. The definition of their ages is not problematic. Some also voiced this respondent's rhetorical question verbatim, how should I know what it is supposed to be like to be this age? And, most did not see themselves as being different, acting differently than at other ages. Again, this group often called itself "old", but despite the actual ages, no one saw himself or herself as acting in unique ways.

A second sort of response to the same question is typified in the words of an eighty-four year old married man. This man has been a community resident for twenty-two years and has been married sixty-one years.

> "We /R and his wife/ can't believe that we've both lived as long as we have ... Oh, I don't mind it, if I was well, 'cause I've been sick all year long this last year the whole year . . . There's an awful lot to be thankful for when you reach this age. Especially just to reach this age, you're thankful. We've found we've reached this age suddenly."

Although this respondent was not more concrete or expansive (his wife was present during the interview and did not want him to "dwell" on the arterial bypass) the tenor of his remarks

about being an age was ambivalent. He is positive about the fact that he has survived to eighty-four, but his definition of being eighty-four also involves illness, pain and a long period of recuperation. There is a meaning to this age but it is an admixture of positive and negative items. Certainly this respondent's statement about what it is like to be eighty-four is closely connected to his ill health. Yet there were some in this group who had ambivalent interpretations despite good health, as was the case of a seventy-three year old widow.

> To me, it's not that bad. But I can see that for people who don't have their health it could be bad. Nobody wants to, we're all getting older, nobody's getting younger. It's just something we can't do anything about. I don't think anyone likes to get old, but we all have to.

This second group of eighteen respondents defines a set of specific ages in an ambivalent way; there are problematic aspects to their chronological ages, and these mark chorono-logical age as having a different meaning from other, younger ages they have experienced.

Thus, the majority of the sample define the situation of being an age as either having little real meaning or as blending positive and negative features. There are six respondents who interpret the notch of age as negative and discernible. Of this group three are vociferously resistant to talking about what the age is like. The most extreme example of resistance is seen in the response of a sixty-eight year old married woman.

> "I have no idea. I couldn't tell you . . . The only thing I can say is that when I had a grandmother, at that age and in that time, they seemed to be old people, but we are living in different times, so I have no idea . . . This is a subject that I'm not terribly interested in. It's meaningless to me, other things are more important."

This respondent truly defines age not as meaningless but as something she would rather not have to define for herself or for the interviewer. The contrast between the denial or refusal to admit a definition and a negative interpretation of the situation is a stark one. Compare the answer above with the reply given by a seventy-four year old woman.

> "Awful. It seems really, it really is. Although I'm able to do everything as far as my hosuework and everything, and my cooking . . . but it's this forgetting. Oh my goodness, you know, I'll go to say something and /R snaps her fingers/ it's gone. It's terrible, and other people say the same thing, but I don't think it's as bad as mine. Mine's very bad.

Both of these examples stand in contradistinction to answers by five respondents who defined an age as discernible and positive. The first statement is from a seventy-one year old married man. The second is from a sixty-nine year old widow. Both come from very different social class backgrounds and races.

> Wonderful. I can't do as much as I used to do at fifty-one or thirty-one, let's face it. But, I just try. I try to keep going every day and take care

> of my house to the best of my current abilities, which naturally they take me time because I cannot work as hard or long as I used to . . . It's different in application. You just find you can't do as many things. You think you can up here /R points to his head/ but when it comes time to put it into practice you can't.

> Well, I'll tell you, I never thought of it as being old. I always think young. . . I think if you think you're getting old you're apt to just get lower and lower and you get to a place after a while, you don't feel like, 'I just don't feel like doing anything.' Sometime, if you just sit long enough you just seem like to me you just get old and wither up and die faster . . . I feel old. But I never think of it as getting old.

Essentially there are three clusters of definitions to an age. For twenty-one respondents there is nothing problematic about being an age. They do not see distinct differences in meaning and action. However, for twenty-six respondents age is termed as having meaning with eighteen expressing equivocal or ambivalent meaning, five positive, and three negative. Another three respondents strongly resist a response to the question and deny that age is of any concern at all. Regardless of objective age and despite variations in how age was defined for self--problematic or unproblematic--most elders were saying as far as age goes I am what I am.

What is old?

Having ascertained how individuals interpreted the meaning of their own age, a question was asked to obtain the charac-

teristics of the more general term, old. Interestingly enough, three respondents in their seventies stated quite firmly that eighty (the chronological age) was old. One person was certain that ninety-two was old, while another suggested ninety-seven. Even after numerous probes, five people maintained that they did not know what old was. However the most frequently mentioned characteristics were poor health/disability and attitude. The fact that poor health/disability is a primary characteristic comes as little surprise. Previous studies have offered strong evidence of this attribute as indicative of old (Maddox, 1966). Nevertheless, it is also true that many who referred to poor health were also in the same breath linking that to physical appearance and/or diminished mobility. The relative weight and order of these factors in this understanding of, old, is not particularly clear. The quotation below gives a glimpse of this.

> Well, my sister-in-law is one year older than I am. And, she's, she's really crippled in a way. She can't get around without a walker. I think she considers herself old too. But otherwise I can't see but what she has the same mental abilities she always had . . . but people call her old, you know.

With respect to attitude, the issue is not linkage of relative importance but the range of attitudes or personality attributes elders said were indicators of old. What is old? Someone "waspish," "self-centered," but old is also ". . . not enough nerve. . . settle down into your surroundings."

> Well, it'd be kind of a negative person, the kind who had resigned himself. I saw this happen to a man who was on the staff when I came here . . . He retired and he sat down and I don't know whether he did anything. He died. He was an old man from my definition.

One eighty-six year old widow who defined her own age as ambivalent, equated old with being useless and in a nursing home.

> Well, I have a friend in a nursing home . . . her husband died and she just didn't take it . . . and they put her in a nursing home. She's in a nursing home . . . and she doesn't do one darn thing. She won't answer a letter, she won't take any physical therapy. She's been there now almost a year. She's a lump . . .I would say she's an old lady. I would say once you become useless you're old . . .

Most of these multiple responses that limn the characteristics of old coalesce into two broad categories of response: health/disability and attitude. The former category has a narrow range of meaning attached to it, but the latter category has a broad range of meanings. Both categories implicitly describe old as thoroughly negative. Indeed, except for the don't knows and one resister, there was only one response that may be treated as reflecting anything positive about old. This reply came from a woman who answered the query in terms of herself and not others. She answered, "Nothing but what I can manage, I guess."

Do you think of yourself as old?

Given the fact that most of this sample's elders have expressed definitions of the situation of their own ages as unproblematic, or as problematic but ambiguous, and that they have also defined old in arrant terms, it is not surprising that thirty-nine of them said that they did not think of themselves as old. There were also five elders who stated that they did think of themselves as old. These five found some company with six others who said yes and no. One or two quotations from each of these categories are presented below.

No

> No, no . . . that is strange but I don't, now that you asked me. Because I really think I have the debilities of an old person. I will have, of course.
>
> No, not really . . . no I don't begrudge the fact that I'm as old as I am. The only thing I have to complain about is that I have so many ailments that it does make it kind of depressing . . .
>
> No. My answer to that is, I guess, a very common one, 'You're only as old as you feel.' I mean feeling old in the sense well I can't do this, I can't do that, I shouldn't try the other thing. No, I don't.

Yes

> Well, yes, I think of myself as old, you know. I think if I could do more, I wouldn't think of myself that way. But . . .
>
> Of course. The funny thing, part of it is, I don't consider myself old and when you called and said you wanted

> to talk to an older person, I thought, 'Oh gee. Am I getting to that stage?' Because when you have good health and you continue in your activities that you don't think about growing older. But my attitude has changed because I had a heart attack. And, I was in the hospital for seventeen days and I'm just getting over it. And, so now I'm beginning to feel, well, old age has finally crept up with me and I have to consider myself, old, I guess now, although I hadn't before.

Yes and No

> Well, I admit to myself that I am, and but I don't think of it. I know I am, I mean logically, of course, I know it. But I don't feel it and I don't think about it. I ignore it.

All of this offers evidence that age and old age are not necessarily mainstays of identity to elders who live in the community. It may be argued that this exists because a substantial portion do not define age as problematic, and because virtually all definitions of old are itemized, negative characteristics which most elders did not see as attached to them. Before one is likely to join age and old into identity (I am old, I think of myself as old) something about being an age, a "self-referential term," as Strauss (1971:99) would say, has to sound a discordant note into daily lives. The process of self-indication is then initiated and both age and old become meaningful anchors in a social world. Consequently identity reflects that position. In addition, Turner's concepts of personal and societal identity anchorages furnish

a way of examining the behavioral outcomes of such identities. Most of the sample's elders recognize and enact roles (grandparent, retiree) associated with old and age but as thirty-nine state, they do not think of themselves as old. A majority of elders are not denying or resisting old age but they do not see identity as emerging in old or age-related roles even though they enact some of those roles. Elders are echoing the refrain, I am what I am, because the meaning of their own age or the negative meaning of old are not molded into a changed meaning for their daily lives. A shift in chronological age and a definition of old as deleterious do not appreciably alter the sense of identity. Elders are not missing the meaning to the experience and construct the experience "in a different form, beyond any meaning" we can assign to age and identity. (T. S. Eliot paraphrased and quoted, The Dry Salvages, II. 94-96).

Footnotes

[1]Neugarten (1980) is on record as having expressed some reservations about the continuing significance of age as a status.

[2]According to Turner (1978:2) "The person is best described in terms of roles that are still played when not called for and that color the way in which other roles are played." His definition of role is the standard sociological one, an expected pattern of behavior. He terms the role-person merger (1978:3) "as a more behavioral complement to the subjective idea of self-conception."

[3]To offer some comparative figures, the following distribution of elders was tallied by the Amherst Council on Aging for the year of 1979. The total number of residents sixty years old and older was 1,834 in 1979.

Age	1979
60-64	18%
65-59	24%
70-74	19%
75 +	36%
unknown	3%

[4]Hewitt and Hall have discussed quasi-theories as explanations that are tendered to make sense of problematic situations.

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